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ABSTRACT

This paper examines pedagogical and methodological considerations involved in language immersion programs in Kyrgyzstan, discussing bilingual education program goals, how children acquire first languages, how language and content can be taught and learned simultaneously, and steps that have been taken to make immersion programs successful in Kyrgyzstan's schools. Kyrgyzstan's bilingual education is designed to facilitate and improve second language learning and maintain bilingualism. It teaches students to communicate in the second language, not just grammatical rules. Immersion programs follow roughly the same progression as first language learning. When teachers and students concentrate on content, they experience the second language as a natural means of communication which does not rank higher or lower than their first language in status or usefulness. The teacher is responsible for creating real communicative situations in the classroom and concentrating on content rather than form. Task-based learning lets students experiment and find solutions to problems on their own. This requires a learner-oriented lesson organization. (SM)

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PEDAGOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the pedagogical and methodological considerations for language immersion programs in kindergartens and schools in Kyrgyzstan. Language immersion is an *organisational* rather than a *methodological* unit. It means that the two languages (Kyrgyz and Russian) are not only taught and learnt as subjects, but that they are also *used as languages of instruction* in non-linguistic subjects, such as mathematics, geography or music (subsequently called "content subjects"). This means that children undergoing bilingual education have to master some subjects in a language which is not their first language (subsequently called "second language") (cf. B. Korth). This special situation demands a special language immersion methodology which prevents shocks and frustration on both learners and teachers and secures the success of bilingual education programs.

To determine a suitable methodology for language immersion, the following questions must be answered: What are the aims of bilingual education programs? How does a child acquire his or her first language and how can this knowledge benefit the development of second language teaching methodology? How can language and content be taught and learnt simultaneously without neglecting one or the other? What practical steps have to be taken in order to make immersion programs and immersion methodology in kindergartens and schools in Kyrgyzstan successful?

2. Teaching Objectives in Bilingual Education

The aim of bilingual education in Kyrgyzstan is to facilitate and improve second language learning (i.e. Russian or Kyrgyz) and to maintain bilingualism (cf. B. Korth). But to what extent can persons who have undergone bilingual education know the second language? And to what extent is it reasonable to expect them to know it?

Ideally, bilingually educated students are able to communicate freely in the second language in all necessary situations. They have a level of knowledge which enables them to extend their second language competencies according to their

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communicative needs after school. This enables them to work in any field or study any subject in the second language, because they are equipped with enough basic knowledge and learning strategies to learn the field-specific language independently.

For programs in kindergartens and schools this means that they must teach their students to *communicate* in the second language in various situations, rather than to know grammar rules, repeat grammatically correct sentences or be able to recite poems. At the same time, they have to provide their students with *strategies of self-determined learning*, by creating situations in which children are able to build hypotheses, verify them and to correct them if necessary.

In addition to the aims directly concerning language and language learning competencies, bilingual education methodology is also concerned with content objectives. In the immersion model, content and language are learnt simultaneously. Bilingually educated children have to learn the same contents in their content classes as children in monolingual schools. It is very important that the *content knowledge* of bilingually educated children does not fall behind that of children who undergo traditional education.

3. Language Learning and Content Learning

Simultaneous language and content learning, as proposed in the previous section, in fact corresponds to the natural process of first language learning. The child learns to distinguish objects in his or her world and at the same time learns to attribute words to these objects. The more complex the child's perception and cognition, the more complex the language to describe this perception and cognition. The motivation to learn the first language is actually the urge to express what we understand in the world and to communicate our cognition. Thus first language acquisition is not, as is often assumed, chaotic, but follows a clear progression of the child's cognitive stages and is – consciously or unconsciously – directed by the people to whom the child relates most closely.

Immersion programs, especially when started at an early age, can follow roughly the same progression as first language learning. They begin with the naming of concrete objects, go on to two-word sentences and more complex structures. The advantage of early second language learning is that it is perfectly normal and

interesting for a very young child to utter single words and two-word sentences. This same thing seems unusual or even childish to a 12-year-old, which can raise unease and thus be counterproductive for the learning process.

The immersion school setting can make use of this natural advantage by exposing the pupils to content that is relevant and interesting to them and, at the same time, exposing them to the second language. The teacher or educator functions as the person who directs the pupils' linguistic and cognitive progress by talking with them about these contents. In this way the teacher does not primarily *teach* language, but *communicates* with the pupils about some interesting topic in the second language and thus provides *qualitatively and quantitatively good linguistic input.*

4. Pedagogical Considerations

One of the most important factors for successful learning is motivation. It is very difficult to motivate pupils to "learn a language" systematically, because the use of learning paradigms and wordlists without context is usually incomprehensible to them. In immersion teaching, on the other hand, the aim and the means of language learning – *communication* – correspond. The pupils can use the language at the same time as they are learning it in real communication, which creates a feeling of success and *motivation.*

While the pupils and teachers concentrate on content, they experience the second language as a *natural means of communication* which does not rank higher or lower than their first language in status or usefulness.

At the same time, pupils are less likely to be afraid of making language mistakes because the important aspect of speaking is to communicate a message. This struggle for meaning enables them to become *more fluent in the second language*, because it supports the struggle for form at the same time. Thus immersion teaching, with the help of proper methods, can provide a positive learning atmosphere, which is crucial to any kind of learning.

5. Teaching Methodology in the Bilingual Classroom

5.1. Communication as the aim and means of language learning and teaching

Since one of the most important aims of bilingual education is for the pupils to be able to communicate in the second language, and since language is acquired through communication itself, in immersion teaching methodology *communication in the second language* is both the aim and the means of learning and teaching. Therefore the most important and basic aspect of immersion teaching is for the teacher to *speak in the second language* to the pupils. This works most naturally if the teachers follows this rule not only during lessons, but also during breaks or when they meet one of their pupils outside school. In this way the pupils perceive the second language as an absolutely natural means of communication with this particular person (and others at the same time).

5.2. Creation of Communicative Situations

The teacher is responsible for creating real communicative situations in the classroom, for making students want to talk about something and concentrate on content rather than form. This can be achieved by choosing topics that the pupils are interested in, or by presenting a topic that is on the curriculum in an interesting way. . The simplest method to make children communicate is games. Games can be used for learners of all ages, even adults, because the complexity of information to be exchanged either differs in various games or can be adapted to the learners' abilities.

In question-answer communication, it is important to ask the learners *real questions* rather than test questions. That means teachers should not ask questions which children assume the teachers could answer themselves. They should rather ask questions that they really want answers to; for example, questions about the children's home or friends. Showing real interest in the children in this way is motivating and makes the children concentrate on what they want to say rather than on how they can say it. In this way the child gets the confidence that he or she really has something interesting to say.

5.3. Task based learning

Apart from linguistic learning, the content learning of pupils must be supported. This again can be done by providing communication about the content topics. The pupils' interest can be raised by letting them do something on their own rather than just presenting them with ready-made information, namely by letting them *solve a task* in connection with a particular topic. This so-called *task-based learning* gives the learner the possibility to experiment and find the solution to a problem on his or her own. Task-based learning makes use of children's natural curiosity as a motivating factor and results in more effective learning, because the feeling of success is more direct and intensive than in learning ready-given facts.

An example of task-based learning in biology is to let the children look at different types of plants, let them describe the plants (orally or in written form) ,classify the plants according to what they see and give reasons for their classifications. Some children might get the classification wrong because they haven't learned it yet. The primary aim of the task is not to find the correct solution, but to *try to find* it. The children get an opportunity to build, verify, and reject or accept hypotheses. By looking at the plants closely themselves and building hypotheses about how they could be classified, the pupils are motivated to ask themselves, "Am I able to find a good solution?". They are motivated to describe the plants and give reasons for their classification because they want to share what they have been thinking, and in the end they will be keen to hear the correct solution and see how it differs from their proposed solution.

5.4. Learner oriented lesson organisation

These kinds of self-determined learning tasks ask for a more learner-oriented organisation of lessons in which the pupils have space to experiment alone or in groups and then present their results in class. In learner-oriented lessons the pupils have more speaking time; the teacher does not always speak to the whole class, but individually to the groups. In this way, the pupils have more possibilities to use the second language with each other and in more intimate interactions with the teacher.

5.5. Classroom language

In order to make it possible for students to really concentrate on content while communicating in the second language, the teachers must be aware of the language they themselves and the pupils use. The teachers must know how to adapt and simplify their language to their pupils' abilities; they need strategies for how understanding can be supported by gestures, intonation, pictures and other extralinguistic means of communication. "Teacher talk" in immersion classes must be redundant enough to ensure that pupils can follow the lesson and learn the content.

Furthermore the teachers should understand the pupils' first language so that the learners can use their mother tongue to express what they want to say in difficult situations. In such cases the teacher can take in the information, praise the student if the content is correct, and repeat the information in the second language. In this way the students get the words or structures that they had difficulties with without interrupting the communication.

5.6. Teacher teams

One very important means of supporting students' linguistic progress is teacher teams. All teachers working in one language form a team that works together with the language teacher to co-ordinate the language used in the classroom, determine which expressions and structures are needed for a certain topic, which ones can be used by the teachers and which ones the pupils are expected to learn. Language teachers can, for example, use topics that are discussed in content classes, provide the learners with new words and practise new structures, which will then be used in the content classes.

One practical example of this, to take up the plant-classification example from above, could be done as follows: The language teacher pre-teaches the children the necessary new words for the classification of plants, such as "leaf, stalk, petal" and so on. Structures to be pre-taught are: "I think that...", "This is the same.../ This is different...", "Those plants belong to the same/different group/s, because...", etc. These structures can also be practised with different topics.

5.7. Dealing with mistakes

In immersion teaching, content is more important than grammatically correct language. Therefore, teachers must be very conscious about how they correct the pupils' language mistakes. In content lessons it is usually sufficient to repeat the learners' linguistically wrong utterance correctly and go on with the conversation. This kind of correction is called "repair"; it has the aim to facilitate communication and make the utterance understood to the other pupils.

In language lessons learners can be expected to concentrate a bit more on form. That doesn't mean, however, that one must drill patterns without content. This can also be practised within the conversation on a specific topic. Language mistakes in the second language are not always negative. Some mistakes are signs of the learners' hypotheses about the structure of the language and thus help the teacher to understand where the learner needs more linguistic explanations. Such mistakes are a sign of the pupils' participation in the conversation and their concentration on the content, which, as explained above, are excellent conditions for the acquisition of the language.

There are stages in language learning when students make mistakes in structures, although in fact they already know how to say it correctly. Usually such mistakes occur when the learner progresses from one linguistic stage to a more complex one, and thus are a sign of positive development. When the teachers hear such a mistake, they can point out to the students, that there was a mistake somewhere and ask them to find and correct it themselves, because self initiated and carried out corrections are more efficient than corrections by others.

5.8. Assessment

In testing the pupils one must take the aims of immersion teaching into consideration, When pupils are taught and expected to be able to communicate in language classes, this is also what must be tested. A language test, therefore, can consist of writing a free text on one of the topics that have been discussed in class, or it can be an oral test in which one of the topics is discussed. What the students are tested on in such assessment is ability and skills rather than knowledge.

In content classes there must be a way that knowledge can be tested without expecting too much of the pupils on the linguistic level. Thus, language correctness

must not be regarded in content tests. One possibility of defusing this problem is to let students write the answers in their first language, if they wish to do so. Another possibility is to give the students multiple choice tests in which they don't have to produce their own sentences. However, these tests demand reading comprehension, which means that the given sentences must be adapted to the pupils' language abilities.

6. Organisational conditions for bilingual education

6.1. Description of content and language aims

As described, above precise *linguistic and content aims* need to be determined. Each region must decide which aims they want their graduates of bilingual education to achieve both in terms of language and content. The standards for content subjects must be no lower than the ones in monolingual schools. The linguistic aims, however, can be determined depending on regional needs: Do we want the children to be able to speak the second language in everyday conversation? Do we want them to be able to read and write in it? Or do we even want them to be able to take part in a scientific discourse in the second language?

A detailed description of these aims is crucial for any further planning of bilingual education. It is needed in order to determine a reasonable curriculum, to develop useful continuing education for the teachers and to develop good teaching material.

6.2. Curriculum

Starting from regionally determined goals and considering the regional linguistic situation, the *curricula* must be determined. How many and which subjects do we want to teach in which classes in the second language in order to reach the aims?

In determining which subject is taught in which language, it is important to teach some more cognitively demanding subjects such as mathematics, physics, biology, geography or history in one language and some in the other to stress the equal usefulness and importance of both languages (cf. B. Korth). At the same time,

subjects which are relevant for qualification usually demand more cognitive attention from the students, which supports the language learning process.

6.3. Teacher training and working plan

All teachers working in bilingual education – even science teachers – need to know methods for teaching language. They must have excellent competencies in their working language and at least basic knowledge of the second language in order to ensure ongoing communication with their pupils even in their first language. Furthermore, those teachers must know how to organise student-oriented lessons and task-based learning. And – especially in the beginning – they need to learn how to produce their own teaching material according to the topic, the pupils linguistic abilities and the content and linguistic aims.

This further education and the additional tasks of the teacher working in a bilingual program, such as team work, production of bilingual teaching material and the preparation of learner oriented lessons, take a lot of time. Such additional demands on bilingual education teachers must be taken into consideration, when their curricula are determined.

6.4. Bilingual teaching material

Another important element that must be organised (and financed) is *the production of bilingual teaching material.* There are ways to produce good teaching materials with little effort and at low cost, especially for the first classes at school where working with pictures and games are a good means of motivating and activating pupils to communicate.

In the production of teaching material, both content and language aims must be considered with equal importance, without watering down the academic content. In Kyrgyzstan there are textbooks for all subjects in both Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Although these textbooks can be used in bilingual education, they must be adapted linguistically and methodically to be useful for student oriented bilingual lessons because they are designed for native speakers of the language.

Thus – especially for the starting phase of bilingual education – the teachers will have to produce their own teaching material. Since the teachers know exactly which content they have to teach their pupils and at the same time are the ones who

know best their pupils' language abilities, they are the best authors of teaching material. On the other hand, producing teaching material takes time. This must be compensated for by reducing the number of lessons taught by one teacher.

If working with text material it is preferable to use primary texts rather than translations. Therefore teachers should have free access to newspapers, journals and other primary sources. It would be a great advantage if new media such as radio, TV-reports, or the internet could also be employed for teaching purposes.

7. Conclusion

Bilingual teaching methodology is based on the simple principle that by motivating the pupils to communicate in their second language and arousing their curiosity, they will be able to find their own solutions to linguistic and content-related problems. For the pupil bilingual education – if taught with the right methodology – creates no additional pressure. On the contrary, it is interesting and motivating.

For teachers, on the other hand, the learning and adaptation of the new teaching method is quite demanding. However, when given enough time and space to learn and work in this new way, it proves to be a motivating challenge for them as well. Under these circumstances, such progressive teachers will be able to realise bilingual education in Kyrgyzstan and thus contribute to the improvement of the linguistic situation in this country.

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